

The Mysterious Ways of Wang Foo.

By
Sidney C.
Partridge.

The Golden Lotus

BY SIDNEY C. PARTRIDGE.

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"NOW, do tell me, captain," remarked Miss Atherton of Lowell, Mass., to the venerable Dan Collins, commanding the Canton river steamer Kiu Kiang on her high trip to Hong-kong, "aren't all those little puffs of smoke that we see arising from the sampans and river junks coming from the boatmen smoking their evening opium pipes? I'm so interested to know"—of course she was, for the fact was she was traveling as the correspondent of one of Boston's most popular papers, though she had never publicly announced it to the rest of the passengers.

"No, madam, not at all," replied the gruff old sea dog, "that's a very popular idea with globe trotters, but it's all a mistake. I'm glad you asked me, for if you hadn't, you might have gone home and written it down in your book on the far east, just as a lot of the rest of 'em do who only stay out here three weeks and then know it all. Most fools, they say, will believe anything you tell them, but the globe-trotting fool is the worst of all, for he doesn't even need to be told. He'll just put down anything he sees for gospel truth, he will. And the fellows who draw the pictures are just about as far off as the ones who write the books, judging from what I saw the last time I was home—every one of them makes the Chinaman's cue grow out of the middle of the top of his head, when no Chinaman ever born had his cue grow anywhere else but out of the back of his head; just look at my table boy there, if you don't believe me. No, madam, as I was a-saying, those little curling columns of smoke are from cooking their evening rice and not from smoking opium at all. Opium doesn't make any smoke, does it, Mr. Wang?" addressing a dignified Chinese gentleman seated near them at the table. "Very little, if any," answered the native passenger (who was none other than the famous Wang Foo or prince of Chinese detectives, traveling in the European saloon). "What little is visible probably arises from the smoking wick of the little bean-oil lamp the habitues use, the drug itself is volatilized and gives forth its strong characteristic odor as they inhale it, but certainly not smoke in any such quantity as you see it now arising from the river boats. Capt. Collins is quite right, madame, as he generally is on these far eastern questions—you see, he is quite an old resident now and understands us very well," accompanying this last celestial compliment with a most gracious smile and bow which went straight to the heart of the old New Bedford skipper.

Miss Atherton was more than pleased and surprised at Wang Foo's explanation; she was simply dumfounded at his English mastery and his scholarly vocabulary (with its flawless accent), which not only surpassed anything she had ever yet heard from a Chinaman, but—to tell the plain and honest truth—most everything she had heard from her fellow-countrymen in the east, not excepting a few American consuls! She could hardly wait for dinner to be over before she rushed up to Captain Collins, just lighting his cheroot on his way to the bridge, and begged him to introduce this remarkable personage to her. "Why, captain," she said, "I never really dreamed there was a Chinaman living who could speak English like that!"

"Well, there ain't very many of them, I can tell you that, ma'am. And what's more, he knows exactly what he's talking about, too, which is more than you can say of a lot of these that are educated abroad and just come back here and chatter off a lot of big words like parrots. Now, if you really want to know anything about China and the Chinese—I mean the truth, not the globe-trotter stuff they pick up from the hotel-boys and the rick-saw coolies and put in the magazines and the books—he's the very best man in all this empire for you to get acquainted with."

Wang Foo was duly presented to Miss Atherton and her party and it is no exaggeration to say that in less than an hour they had really learned more about the middle kingdom and its people and customs than the miserable so-called "guides" had been able to give them in a week. "And now, ladies and gentlemen," he said, as they were about to leave the deck where he had been pointing out objects of interest, "if you really want to see opium smoking, and don't mind a little inconvenience, we have the golden opportunity right here and now. The native passengers have all finished their even-



"WATCH THAT FELLOW ON THE LEFT HERE HE IS JUST BEGINNING."

ing rice and after their customary siesta they are beginning to light their pipes and 'pass to the land of pleasant dreams' as they say, and if you will follow me I shall be very glad to escort you to the upper deck and explain the system to you. They are smoking in the open air there and you will find the atmosphere much less oppressive than in the crowded native saloon."

Delighted to have the opportunity, they all gladly followed Wang Foo up the starboard companionway and, with the captain's permission, passed through the iron grating which on all river steamers still shuts off the native passengers from the Europeans. (They noticed the Manila quarter-master standing there on guard, fully armed, and the significant boiling-water hose right at hand, ready for instant use in case of any mutinous or piratical outbreak, for these old-fashioned precautions still have to be taken as long as robbers and pirates conceal themselves among the passengers). What a sight there met their eyes! Stretched out for a distance of over 200 feet or more were rows and rows of what at first sight appeared to be bags of rice or logs of wood, but which on nearer inspection turned out to be human beings. They were lying just as closely to one another as they could without actually touching and all of them absorbed in the process of preparing or inhaling the drug and apparently entirely dead to the outer world.

"Just follow me, please, and step carefully over them," said their guide, suiting the action to the word—some of the party hesitated—"Oh, it's all right," he said, reassuringly, "they won't mind it at all as long as you don't actually step on them or kick over the trays."

Stopping at a convenient vantage ground near the top of the paddle box, he began, "You notice that everyone is lying on his side, generally the left, so that he can have his right hand and arm free to handle the pipe, and is facing the little lacquer tray. Now look carefully and you will see that each tray contains four articles, viz., a little oil lamp, a small pill box made of black horn, a set of long steel knitting needles and a bamboo tube about an inch and a half in diameter and a foot and a half in length."

"Just let me jot that down, please," said Miss Atherton, as she drew out her little notebook, "there's still light enough to write by and it's so interesting. I don't want to miss a word of it. There! I've got them all four down, now, please go on Mr. Wang."

"Let me describe these articles separately," continued the detective; "the oil lamp has no chimney, you see, but is covered with a little glass globe about three inches in diameter—made very thick so that the heat will not crack it—and in the top of this is a little opening which is just above the tip of the flame and through which the smoke and hot air escape. The pill box, as I call it, is the little receptacle made of horn which contains

the opium; this is about the consistency of thick molasses and is made of this material because they believe it will preserve the drug and not affect its flavor—"

"It is awfully expensive, is it not?" interrupted one of the party.

"Oh, yes, it runs all the way from silver to gold, as they say. Of course, there are all varieties and values, from the comparatively reasonable article raised in Yun Nan to the golden fluid that is imported from Patna. What they are using right here upon the deck is the poorer quality, as all of these are steerage passengers down in the private cabins below us, you will find a much more expensive variety. Now, the knitting needles—I always use that term in explaining the process to Americans, because it makes it so much clearer—are simply long steel points which are used to dip out the opium from the pill-box, and the long bamboo tube is, of course, the pipe itself. Look at the one right next to us, here. You see it is closed at the shorter end and has a small perforation at the longer end, which generally consists of a copper cap fastened in there and gratifies a native whim of 'breathing through money' as they say. About a quarter of the way from the end, or where the mouth-hole would be in an old-fashioned flute, you will notice the bowl. This is made of red pipe-clay and is completely closed over with the exception of a tiny opening a little larger than a pin-hole right in the center. So there you have the apparatus, now for the trick! Let us watch this fellow on our left, for he is just beginning. First, he lights his little lamp and adjusts the wick to just the proper height, then he dips one of the needles into the pill-box and stirring it around draws out a little ball of the drug; he spreads the ointment over the top of the bowl right around the edge of the opening and then holds it over the lamp. Now, watch him! He puts his lips to the ash-opening at the end of the pipe and as the hot air volatilizes the opium and it fills the bowl, he slowly draws the heated mixture into his lungs and the pleasurable sensations begin. He quickly forgets the world and all its troubles and wanders around in a native paradise of undiluted happiness! I hope I have made it clear to you—"

"You most certainly have," replied Miss Atherton, tendering to Wang Foo the appreciations of all the party, "and now permit me to ask you just one more question, which do you consider the greater curse, opium or alcohol?"

"Well," thoughtfully and slowly said the detective, "that is, of course, one of the leading questions which is often put to us by our American friends, and I do not believe, speaking after many years of careful observation, that a positive and decisive answer can be given to it. The

slavery and degradation is about the same in either case, whenever the poor victims get really under the spell. There is, however, a difference in the form of the effect, if not in the degree. Alcohol will lead a man to commit violence and crime on others; opium rather to deceit, dishonesty, sneaking theft and the more degrading forms of self-destruction. The drunkard will beat his wife and children and starve them for his drink; the opium smoker will not attack them, but he will sell them—body and soul—for his drug. As our friend Capt. Collins says, 'You can take your choice.'"

"And is there really no cure for it? That is one of the questions I was told to especially ask when I came to China."

"In answer to that I can only say that, while there is an enormous traffic all over the east in the so-called 'opium cures'—many of which are only the drug under another name and most of which are frauds and deceptions—it is the general testimony of the ablest physicians that, unless the cases are taken at their earliest stages, mere medical treatment alone is useless. Speaking as a very humble Confucianist, I join hands here with my friends the missionaries from the west, and say, in the name of this great moral teacher of the east, there is really no hope for the opium smoker except in his spiritual regeneration."

A week or two after Wang Foo's meeting with the American party on the Canton steamer he was passing along Queen's road in the latter part of the afternoon, when he was suddenly hailed by a lady in a passing jinrikisha. "Oh, Mr. Wang, Mr. Wang!" she cried, "just a moment, please, just a moment—" The coolie turned the little vehicle sharply in toward the curbing, lowered the shafts and allowed Miss Atherton to step over them onto the sidewalk. "It is really almost rude for me to stop you in this unceremonious way," she said, "but I am so anxious to have you help me on a little matter of translation. You know, after that wonderful explanation you gave us of the opium smoking on the steamboat, I don't feel that any of my information is really authentic unless it has your indorsement—but what is that jinrikisha, coolie saying, and why does he look so upset at me? I haven't done anything wrong to the poor man, have I? You know I feel humiliated enough to make a draught horse out of my fellowman, without doing him any further injury, that's the reason

I always pay them double what they ask."

"Oh, nothing of any serious consequence," replied Wang Foo; "he is simply grumbling to himself because you stepped over the crossbar instead of over the shafts. They have a little idea—perhaps you would call it a superstition—that if the passenger does that they will have bad luck for the rest of the day; that is all."

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"Is that really so? Well, please explain to him for me that I didn't know anything about it and that I wouldn't have hurt his feelings for the world. Shall I give him some extra money—"

"No, please don't do that; you are largely overpaying him as it is, and any extra gift simply makes it all the harder for the next European passenger that rides after you," and, turning to the mumbling coolie, he rattled off a few yards of his native tongue, which had the perfectly magic effect of turning his wrath into smiles and making him bow almost into the dust at the feet of his "Venerable Father."

"You must excuse my not removing my native hat, Miss Atherton," he concluded, "but you know you are in China now, and here the laws of courtesy are exactly reversed and true politeness requires that gentlemen remain covered in the presence of ladies and—their other superiors," he added with a smile.

"Oh, yes, indeed, that is one of the little 'topsy-turvy' things I have already noted in my diary," she replied.

"And now what is it that I can have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"Why, just this," drawing from her little handbag a folded piece of native yellow paper; "we have been visiting the Temple of the Golden Lotus on the other side of the island and have had a most interesting day of it. The old priest in charge of the shrine showed us everything and when we came away he insisted on writing this Chinese charm for me and told me it would bring me good luck as long as I lived. I have been waiting until I could find some one who could give me a perfect translation of it, for I know it must be something full of oriental mystery."

"Have you not shown it to any one else yet?" inquired Wang Foo, as he took the paper from her hand and carefully unrolled it.

"Well, only to the hotel roomboy, who is acting as our guide, and of course all I could get out of him was a lot of that miserable pidgin-English jargon about 'Misee, him talkee b'longee velly good joss. All samee lotus flower climbee down-side go top-side. Him glow mud, by 'me' by all samee water, den must come outside look see. Misee all samee so fashion."

The Man of Mystery broke into a gentle laugh at the roomboy's attempts to interpret the Celestial poetry. "Yes," he said, "it certainly is a most cumbersome and unsatisfactory medium of translation and expression, but he did the best he could with the means at his command. This is a poetical quotation in which the lotus is taken as the emblem of human progress. I will read it to you just as it stands:

"Yiu huk too,
Ching sui tao
Tung choy chui,
Ching lien jak."

"You see, it is very brief and condensed, consisting of only twelve words in all, written in four lines of three characters each. Of course, I could not attempt to give you a satisfactory version right offhand here on the road, but possibly I can improve a little on the roomboy's efforts. Let me try:

"From the dark earth,
Through the clearer water
To the air and light,
The Golden Lotus ever
Pushes its upward way."

There. That isn't very much, but it is the best I can do on the spur of the moment." As he spoke these words, a strange look of mysterious inquiry—amounting almost to suspicion—came over his face, which fortunately escaped the lady's notice, "it really requires to be considerably expanded to give it a satisfactory English rendering, so, if you will kindly allow me, I should just like to take this paper home with me and I will return it to you at the hotel tomorrow, with something a little better than a mere roadside version."

"Oh, thank you so much, nothing would please me more, I am sure. It is most kind of you to take all this trouble. It is a perfect little gem of poetry, I know; one could see that even from the room boy's pidgin."

He assisted her into her jinrikisha and directing the coolie to take her to the "Ocean-man's Inn," waited until she was safely around the curving street. Stepping into the shadow of the neighboring alley, he took the paper out of his sleeve, where he had temporarily secluded it, and began to scrutinize the handwriting. "The slight curving of the left downward stroke. The shortening of the cross lines and the peculiar seal script in the character for 'lotus'—it is he. Villain, thy penmanship hath betrayed thee," he repeated to himself